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ABSTRACT

In the past 15 years, there has been a great upsurge in interinstitutional cooperation, a momentum which will probably increase in the next 15 years. In order to find answers to some basic questions affecting consortia, the Midwest Association for Higher Education (MAHE)-a pseudonym-was studied. This paper deals primarily with the question: what conflicts arise as interdependency increases and how are these conflicts managed in such a way as to preserve the interinstitutional character of the consortium? Conflict in MAHE was directly primarily toward the central office, and to some extent toward other colleges in the cooperative. The specific conflicts seemed to center around four central problem areas: (1) the role and scope of the central office; (2) the distribution of limited resources; (3) the heterogeneity of member institutions attempting to seek common goals; and (4) administrative procedures and management as the consortium developed. The four mechanisms used for resolving conflict between the colleges and the central office were: (1) a clear division of labor; (2) a system of checks and balances; (3) formation of coalitions; and (4) a philosophical ethos of voluntarism. Since conflict will inevitably arise in any kind of cooperative effort, it is vital to learn to deal with it constructively. (AF)

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Conflict in Interinstitutional Cooperation

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Somebody once asked poet Carl Sandburg the meaning of the inscription on the National Archives building in Washington, "The past is prologue." He paused for a moment, then the distinguished poet replied "It means, 'you ain't seen nothing yet'."

The same might be said of the field of higher education, and it is nowhere more true than in the area of interinstitutional cooperation. In the past 15 years the revolutionary concepts and significant changes engendered by cooperation have come to be accepted as normal. In the next 15 years, the development of programs of interinstitutional cooperation may be so significant as to make what we are now doing seem backward.

In the consortium movement there is a commitment to expanding opportunity, especially for the small private college. Why should private colleges extravagantly compete as Mom/Pop stores in the day of the super-market? When we talk of cooperation in this way, we are only expanding on Logan Wilson's concept of "rationalization in higher education." We need to be more rational about higher education and less romantic and tradition-bound. There is need for emphasis on systematic organization and operation in institutional research and analysis, and for sound management principles. It seems more sensible to cooperate--but at the same time and in the same spirit, it is important to know what we are doing. Naturally, we do not wish to plunge into all sorts of new arrangements without having asked and answered important prior questions.

I undertook some research that sought to answer some basic questions about colleges and cooperation:

1. Why do colleges join in cooperation?
2. What is the central task of the central office?
3. What effects do the interdependencies have on the participating institutions?
4. What conflicts arise as interdependency increases and how are these conflicts managed in such a way as to preserve the interinstitutional character of the consortium?

Summary of Research

Of course we do not have time to discuss all four questions. The last question concerning conflict and conflict-management mechanisms is the one I wish to elaborate upon. But I will briefly report the answers my research suggested for the first three questions:

1. Why do colleges join a consortium?
   --They do not know why
   --No prior relationship--for the most part--existed before the formal organization
   --Cooperation was almost an end in itself.
2. What is the central task of the central office?
   --The central office exists to justify the cooperation and to create interdependencies
   --It is organized to help the colleges discover what they can do together and, of course, then to enable them to do it.

HE 001 355

3. What effects--both positive and negative--do the interdependencies have on the member campus?
   --There is a paradox here--maybe the answers aren't in yet, but I found the effects are more than one might think and also less.
   --The area of greater effect is in the area of administrative service and in the areas of informal or subtle effects on the faculty who participate.
   --Not much grass roots involvement, very little saving of money, small effect on campus dynamics.

Conflict in an Interorganization

The preceding summary serves as the context of what I wish to say about conflict in interinstitutional cooperation.

The central assumption of the research is that as cooperation creates interdependency, conflict and competition increase in the consortium. This is not something that can be prevented--or should be prevented. No amount of good will, or best intentions, or nice guys can avoid conflict in an organization that is serious about cooperation. In an interorganization of independent and autonomous institutions conflict is characteristic--a given of the association. Sociologists of the Talcott Parsons school tend to see conflict in an organization as dysfunctional or negative in its organizational effect. Most administrators view it this way also. In the typical monocratic hierarchical structure, harmony is the goal and consensus is administered from the top. However, in an interorganization--a consortium--conflict and competition may serve a positive function (e.g., defining boundaries, generating search behavior, providing a sense of independence) and should be accepted and legitimatized.

I have said two simple things about conflict and cooperation:

1. Cooperation leads to conflict.
2. Conflict should not be avoided.

The third point that logically derives from this is an organization must provide conflict structures or mechanisms to manage conflict--not resolve it--but manage it in a way that channels raw conflict into impersonal and positive forms of organizational expression.

Conflict as found in the consortium studied: "The Midwest Association for Higher Education" (a pseudonym) was directed primarily toward the central office, but some measure of conflict was also directed toward other colleges in the cooperative. As one college president put it, "This is no longer a gentleman's card game--there are too many chips on the table." Another president said, "Cooperation has sharpened our fangs."

The specific conflicts that developed seemed to cluster around four central problem areas:

1. Role and scope of the central office
2. Distribution of limited resources of an interorganization
3. Heterogeneity of member institutions attempting to seek common goals
4. Administrative procedures and management as the consortium develops.

1. Role and Scope of the Central Office

The first problem that was mentioned when any question about conflict was asked of either the central office staff or those of the member institutions was the issue of

"centralization versus decentralization." The comments took different modes of expression, of course, but the concern reflected centered around the role and scope of the central office. Terms commonly used were "super-organization", "empire building", "tail wagging the dog", "bureaucracy". The following, each from a different college, were representative of the sense of conflict that had arisen related to this theme:

> I'm afraid the MAHE has grown pretty big; they still want us to provide the ideas, but if they got so big as to provide the ideas and lead us too . . .
>
> We are seriously concerned as to where the consortium is heading. The MAHE office and Washington seem to want us welded together in a type of dispersed university. The colleges want help that benefits the teaching-learning task on the campuses. So much is spent on building up the central office.
>
> Look at the size of the staff of MAHE. My institution could use a director of institutional research and one or two more specialists in planning and systems procedures.
>
> Major conflict? It's organizational philosophy--centralization versus decentralization. The guys need to get in and do the work rather than just talk. They need to visit campuses.

The signs of this tension were manifested in the fact that the Board of MAHE decided that as new offices developed they should be located on the campuses, rather than rent additional office space in the bank building where the central office had been housed. This move led to a reorganization of the central office, with major officers, such as the institutional research officer and the coordinator of academic affairs, located on college campuses in the metropolitan area. An article in the magazine section of a national newspaper phrased the policy of MAHE as "scattered about in rather unobtrusive offices in the southern suburbs (the staff works on a low-visibility policy to avoid the Big Headquarters look) . . . . Although diplomatically phrased, this step did not come about without considerable pressure from the majority of college presidents, especially a smaller group that seemed to be spokesmen for those who were most concerned about the size of the central staff and their growing power in the consortium affairs.

One way in which the tension over the growing power and expanding role of the central office was expressed was with regard to relationships with the United States Office of Education. In 1968 the United States Office of Education turned down requests from many of the individual colleges for National Teaching Fellows, but granted six to the consortium to be distributed among the 16 colleges. Many of the presidents interpreted this to mean that their direct or unilateral contact with the Office of Education was channeled through MAHE. As one college president said, "This year most of us were turned down by USOE, which was a blow to all of us. Now we must look to the Association to see what we are going to get, and where the money is going." Other presidents said much the same thing, in effect expressing the feeling that the central office had in some way usurped the place of the respective campuses. "Money was taken from us and given to the consortium." Whether unwittingly or not, the USOE grants being channeled through the central office served to magnify the impression of the growing power of the central staff.

2. Problem of Distribution of Limited Resources

In an organization made up of autonomous and presumably equal institutions, how do you distribute the resources of the group? Was strict equality fair? The Midwest

Association had difficult questions to resolve along these lines because much of the income was obtained from the federal government or foundation through grant proposals. Such proposals were usually granted for projects that were experimental; this is, they provided money for the unusual and different. The colleges in the consortium, however, needed financial assistance that was much more basic. By their own judgment, the presidents and business officers of the cooperating colleges admitted the difficulty of the programs of MAHE being designed so that they really made a difference. One president who was struggling to keep his institution alive and viable said, "My first concern is to get us established firmly. Many things MAHE is doing are over and above our bread and butter needs. There are basic things that need to be done here. I am building fundamentals, therefore they are not as much help to us."

The consortium staff agreed that MAHE must strengthen the individual campuses. The consortium president inevitably described the role of the consortium as "helping the colleges do collectively what they could not do--or do as well--alone." However, he recognized the "problem of exotic projects, when bread and butter is needed." As one president saw it, "The President and all of the Board would say that the goal of the consortium is to strengthen institutions through cooperative activities. The division of the house is what activities would strengthen member campuses." The tension increased as large amounts of money were spent on development of the central office or on projects that were not fundamental to extremely pressing needs.

One of the sources of this conflict was that few of the projects that had been funded got down to the faculty or student level. A growing concern was that so many of the projects tended to deal with administrative concerns and not the traditional academic matters, or what some described as the "heart of the campus." This led to comments such as, "Not enough of the money is getting back on the campus. We all might be better off if the $800,000 was divided 16 ways and we pocketed the cash." On the other hand, when money was designated for use on the campus, there was the risk of being criticized for distorting the program of the college. As one faculty member said, "There is internal conflict and hostility as colleges distort their purposes and practices to get federal money." Or as a president complained, "We do something the Office of Education wants--at their expense--then we have to pick up the tab later."

3. Problem of Heterogeneity

One of the characteristics of MAHE was the diversity of the institutions which belonged to the consortium. Could there be significant cooperation where there was little genuine mutuality of interest? The consortium technically included colleges from three states, both public and private institutions, Catholic and Protestant, urban and rural, junior colleges and universities. As one faculty member stated the problem, "MAHE is made up of a mixed bag; [they are] not going to get the reciprocal give and take of like institutions." The central purpose of the consortium, of course, was to help each college better achieve its goals. Yet it was difficult for MAHE to meet the wide ranging needs of its constituents. As one college president said: "Do the colleges have enough in common to justify the fee?" Another dimension of conflict was the need for the cooperative to compete for conflicting loyalties of the institutions. The orientation of some of the colleges, for example, was much more toward their state university rather than toward the university in the metropolitan center of the consortium.

At the Midwest City Junior College they sensed a "considerable divergence between where we are going and where they are going." As the president viewed the matter:

> The majority of institutions in MAHE are private, four-year liberal arts colleges. The program emphasis has been along lines that are of interest

to the majority of the colleges. Thus, most of the discussion is wasted for the junior college people.

The geographical and other differences between the colleges became more a problem as interdependency sought to go beyond superficialities. A sense of pressure to cooperate in spite of differences was felt by the member colleges. To some extent, as one president stated, "inevitably there is conflict as awareness grows that HEW may be forcing cooperation. No self-respecting college wants to lose its individuality and distinctiveness in a centralized conglomerate." James Doi has commented in this regard, "Each charter member comes to the group with a somewhat different history and a consciousness of its distinctiveness. How to maintain this distinctiveness as a member of the group, committed to a future of perhaps increasing interdependency, suggests a major set of administrative concerns."1/

4. Conflict Over Administrative Procedures

As the interdependencies increase, the thesis assumes that conflicts will increase. The fourth type of conflict that developed in MAHE was over administrative procedures. Of course, many aspects of the three preceding problems could have been considered administrative in nature, or at least could have been ameliorated by administrative changes. However, distinctive and specific problems remained which seemed to increase in intensity and importance as interdependencies increased. Some of these, as will be noted, seemed to be peculiarly related to administrative problems of interorganizations.

When asked about conflicts or problems in the consortium, most presidents and some other officers mentioned tensions over the central office's approach to administration. It was difficult for them to be precise, but the problem appeared to be centered around methods or philosophy of management. The consortium had "grown too big for the consortium President to do everything," as one college president put it. Another thought that the administrative machinery was due for an overhaul; in fact, recent actions of the Board in re-organizing itself were pointed out as representative of steps in the right direction. Typical of criticisms relating to administration and coming from a wide range of institutions and officers, were the following:

> A better system of checks and balances is needed.
> It is necessary to better define the organization.
> [The consortium president] is a political animal, not an administrator.
> The biggest conflict is over organizational philosophy.
> Only one or two of the college presidents really understand administrative matters.
> The weakness of the administrative organization of MAHE was that everything had to be brought up to the Board, and everything that came before the Board had to have been approved by the Executive Committee.
> Presidents on a Board of Trustees made it more pushy than other Boards.

An Administrative problem existed between the role of MAHE staff members and the respective campus officers. It was an extremely delicate matter for the consortium to send representatives to a campus to work directly with campus personnel such as faculty or students and not be responsible to the respective college president. This was fraught with administrative problems as yet unresolved in MAHE. At the time of this

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1/ Doi, James I. "Comments on the Conference: Administrative Concerns," Journal of Higher Education, 38 (October 1967), pp. 389-93.

research, the current policy of the central office was described by one dean as "Super-neutral" toward issues of educational significance about which there was any controversy.

A further administrative problem was how to involve the faculty of the respective campuses. One major complaint that almost everyone on the campuses reiterated was the amount of time consumed by consortium-related activities. Some campuses were a considerable distance from the MAHE central office and resented the frequent trips required to Midwest City. On the other hand, equally resented by the same people was any tendency on the part of the central staff to assume authority without consulting the colleges or the executive committee.

Conflict Management Mechanisms Arise

The direction of four of the conflicts in the consortium was not primarily toward the other colleges. If there was perceived threat to the identity of the member institutions, it was from the growing strength of the central office, especially the President. The conflict management mechanisms which had developed at this point in the history of the MAHE were thus between the colleges on one hand, and the consortium office on the other. While it is probable that conflict management mechanisms will be required between the colleges themselves or coalitions of the colleges, this would seem to require a closer interdependency than existed at the time of this research. The four conflict management mechanisms that I shall discuss (there are others) dealt with conflicts between the colleges and the central office.

1. Division of Labor

The most obvious example was the reorganization of the Board of Trustees which was, in effect, a type of reorganization of the consortium. Composed of all the presidents of the member institutions, the task of the Board prior to 1968 was one of approving the recommendations of the Executive Committee of the Board and of the functional committees of MAHE. Both the Executive Committee and the functional committees had been thought to be under the strong influence of the central office staff, and especially of the President. The time of the entire Board was virtually consumed rubber stamping the work of the Executive Committee, with little genuine opportunity for initiation, on the one hand--or relief from routine on the other. Functional committees of deans, business managers, etc., were led by MAHE staff and did most of the program development. The Board was restructured into four sub-committees--academic affairs, student affairs, financial affairs, administrative services--which were expected to increase the authority of the Board through their actions in the sense that they would act independently both of the functional committees and especially of the consortium president. This designation of authority is viewed as a source of conflict resolution for the college presidents.

The latest attempt to work out a clear division of labor as a means of conflict management occurred when the September 19, 1968, Board meeting elected to go into executive session, thereby excluding for the first time the President and key staff of MAHE from the discussions of the Board. Minutes of previous meetings indicated as many as seven staff members had attended Board meetings. The President had always been in attendance and in recent years had prepared the agenda and kept the minutes. The reasons for the unprecedented executive session of the Board related to the role of the Board and the role of the President in the leadership of MAHE. This had come into focus in the discussion prior to executive session when at one point the consortium President referred to a statement in a discussion paper which mentioned the staff carrying out the policies of the consortium President. The ensuing discussion

was along the lines that it was the Board which formulated the policy--not the President.

2 System of Checks and Balances

A second common mechanism of conflict management is a system of checks and balances. An institutionalization of checking on the part of parties to a potential conflict not only ensures that the balance of power is not too unequal, but also means that checking is one of the accepted rules of the game and, thus, is not to be considered a personal matter or a breach of cordiality. This practice was built into the consortium operation in fundamental ways. For example, the policy of having the president of each member college a member of the Board of Directors, every dean on the deans' functional committee, and a balance between Protestant and Catholic as well as between public and private colleges on the Executive Committee are part of a system of checks and balances.

Another system of checks and balances was the policy that all projects were voted on by the presidents. Further, no MAHE staff member could really disagree with a college president. As a central office person stated, "We are not going to do anything on any campus that the respective president does not want." This differs from the role of most Boards of Trustees which make policy and then leave implementation to the administrators. To an extent then, even though a project or policy was approved by the Board, its specific application on each campus must also be approved. One result was that every president was fully informed about any communication with MAHE on his campus. Copies of all letters and literautre crossed the college president's desk. In this sense, although the MAHE president and the staff were technically responsible to the Board, they were also responsible to every president with regard to implementing approved programs. In response to this, the central staff at the time of this research was seeking to fund an on-campus representative of the consortium who would be their man on the campus.

3. Coalitions

Another type of conflict management that seemed to be employed was the formation or maintenance of coalitions, or the seeking of social support through the identification with other organizations lessening the impact of the consortium. The identification of the colleges with other associations and the association of the central staff with other organizations may have served as a type of conflict management. In response to the problems of coping with the conflicting demands of those in a particular role-set "associations are formed with other normative systems which anticipate and mitigate conflicting expectations." On the part of the consortium personnel, outside associations compensated for lack of rights of appeal from Board vetoes by providing a supportive constituency. According to one member of the MAHE staff, MAHE had contact with another consortium in Midwest City and two in another state "at least once a week." Relationships outside the consortium provided an opportunity for venting of feelings and free expression not possible within the organization. On a larger scale, the Midwest Association for Higher Education joined a national organization of consortium personnel to foster professional development, recognition, and career commitment.

In a similar manner, the colleges in the consortium had continued to maintain strong ties with other associations in addition to MAHE. In some cases these seemed to be related to denomination or geography, e.g., one college re-established closer ties with its state university. Sometimes there were coalitions of like points of view on conflicts within the consortium. It was to be expected that alliances and coalitions of this latter type would develop, but it should be noted that coalitions appeared to have developed more rapidly in the months just prior to this research as a result of issues

between the central office and the member colleges. All of these coalitions provided a type of conflict management and could be considered a conflict reduction mechanism.

4. Ethos of Voluntarism

A final conflict management mechanism was a philosophical ethos of voluntarism respected by both the central office and the college representatives. Membership was voluntary and participation in any individual project was voluntary. "The principle of independence and the individual identity of member colleges is a fundamental policy which [the consortium president] articulates very well." "There are constant reminders that any college can pull out," said one college president. Another president felt that "cooperation is voluntary. However, there is some give and take--a moral suasion not to do things otherwise." A business manager said that tension in the consortium was less than one might expect because "this is not like a football conference where they drop you if you don't play one sport." On the other hand there may have been the suspicion that getting out might not be easy. As one president rather bitterly observed, "We like to think we can leave any time, but I am not so sure that we could get out now even if we wanted." Whatever the actual situation, the relationship of each member unit to the linkage system was defined as voluntary with freedom to take unilateral action or to participate in joint ventures at the discretion of the institution.

Conclusion

Certainly further research needs to be done with regard to these modest insights from one case study. The implication, however, is clear: conflict is a considerable factor in consortium life. For those who would administer consortiums, this raises the fundamental question of whether their task is best understood in terms of the corporate or the political model. The toleration of conflict - conflict accepted and legitimatized through appropriate structures is the essential difference between the corporate and the political approach to understanding organizational relationships. In the past, higher education has borrowed insights and generalizations from the traditional corporate model - we all read our Bernard, Carson - but in view of this research the political model seems more appropriate to understanding the consortium.

Burton Clark has suggested that patterns of interorganizational behavior lie "somewhere between the ways of concerting action that are commonly found in corporations and those found in political arenas." He may be right, but too often we lean toward vain or romantic notions of our roles. This brings us back to the rational in higher education which we discussed at the beginning. Let me propose that the consortium presidency, like that of a college or university, is a political office. No man who lacks a zest for political action should accept the presidency of a consortium.

The distribution of power and responsibility among the various members of the higher education community is now in question as it has never been before. The traditional patterns of the past are under assault. Under these circumstances the character of our leadership is political. In the field of cooperation, we must learn to live constructively with conflict, and in its shadow--or light, make right judgments about the reshaping of higher education.